

# SIETAR USA 2010 Conference

## Realities of Power and Privilege in Cross-Cultural Service

Sharon R. Lane; Stephen W. Jones; Todd A. Bowder; John A. Myer; Rebecca Tschetter  
Grace University – Omaha, NE

“Whenever someone from the West enters into a new culture they are bringing with them elements of power such as their finances, resources, technology, relational networks, and a passport.” Elmer (2006, pg. 171)

### What is Power and Privilege?

Power is the ability to coerce cross-cultural partners to cooperate or comply with one’s will. This often happens unconsciously as a result of political and economic inequality. Privilege constitutes unearned favor as a result of one’s ascribed status.

### Why does it matter?

Awareness and careful understanding of the power and privilege that exists within a relationship is necessary for communication, cooperation, and equality to thrive.

### How does it play out?

- **Money:** An economically dependent partner will often acquiesce to the will of the partner with the monetary power.

From our experience...

*A group of students was preparing to leave their host country after a six-month study abroad experience. The students wanted to honor their hosts and friends, and they decided to give away 50 kilo bags of rice to people they felt were in need. Their host seemed to approve and also provided a list of possible recipients throughout the region who were directly connected with the organization and were in need of such a gift.*

*The students decided to give to people who had connected with the students, regardless of their affiliation with the organization. Meanwhile, local organization officials who had no direct connection to the students were not given gifts.*

*Two years later, the students’ program director found out that the host organization had been very offended by the choices of who had received gifts. The organization’s leader felt the students’ choice was very insulting while the students believed it made perfect sense.*

- **Autonomy:** Individuals and organizations from a culture that values autonomy and individualism must be aware of the connectivity that exists within communal and holistic cultures which they enter.

From our experience...

*A group of American students visited the capital city to go shopping, go the bank, and do other errands as well as visit a pool and eat ice cream. For convenience sake, they did not stop and greet their main contact and host in that city. They did not want to be obligated to include him in their plans. When he found out, he expressed disbelief and frustration that his guests were so inconsiderate.*

- **Education:** Often because of opportunities and education, advantages are given and superiority is assumed.

From our experience...

*An American professor at a non-western Bible school refused to teach what the school director wanted him to teach. The professor chose to teach what he thought was best instead of what the director thought was best. Because of his credentials, the American felt free to teach what he valued rather than what the director had requested.*

- **Authority:** When a person or an organization carries privilege and/or power, they at times are able to avoid submitting themselves to local authorities whether that be in the context of an organization, institution, or government.

From our experience...

*An American student living in an African capital city accidentally lost her pre-paid cell phone in the street. Later, she received a call from a local man who had found her phone. He was requesting a small finder's fee – about \$15. She and another student went to meet the man. When he gave her the phone, instead of giving him the money like he expected, she took the phone and got into the taxi to drive away. The man tried to get the phone back and a small scuffle ensued in which he succeeded.*

*The students went to the local police because they felt exploited. The understaffed, underfunded police cut time out of their busy day to deal with a minor issue. When they arrested the man, he gave the phone back. However, he could not reimburse the students for money spent on taxis and the students tried to suggest a suitable consequence instead.*

- **Language:** There are certain privileges inherent in the widespread use of the English language. Key among these are the relative ease of finding someone who can understand English, the desire of others to interact with English raises us in their esteem, and lack of knowledge of hosts' language effectively silences or distorts the wishes of many service partners.

From our experience...

*A group of students were studying in Africa. They focused studying the French language instead of the local Bambara language. At the same time, they were interested in teaching*

*English to anyone who would learn. Some of the African students they interacted with were frustrated when the American students chose to speak only to those who knew English rather than learn how to converse with those whose primary languages were French or Bambara.*

- **Detachment:** When a person or organization has relative mobility, it is often possible to leave behind any negative consequences of their actions while community partners must continue to live in that context.

From our experience...

*A western female student and a local man became involved romantically. The man was already engaged and his family disapproved of his relationship with the western woman. She was aware that they disapproved but decided that love should run its course. When her time of study was up, she went back to America planning to return. He became obligated to marry his fiancée and was left with the social consequences of having broken his word to his fiancée while the American student felt no real consequences of the relationship.*

**Application:** How Grace University tries to interact with Power and Privilege responsibly

**“Power is to be used in the service of others and only secondarily, if at all, for the benefit of oneself... the servant’s exercise of power should increase mutual openness, acceptance, and trust. Power is meant to be shared with the goal of empowering others.”**

Humility as a power equalizer -

- Space – create a culturally safe space for truth to flow
  - Use of intermediary
  - Utilizing absence regarding the person of power
- Symbols – use culturally appropriate symbolic actions and gestures to reinforce our desired message
  - Appropriate body posture and gestures
  - Personal friendships
  - Apologies – expressing regret and asking forgiveness on behalf of our organizations

Our early attempts...

*We have been sending teams of students to Mali for several years. In 2007, the team had unknowingly offended many of the leaders in the national church. As the next team was preparing the leave in 2009, the leaders in the national church finally felt comfortable with our*

*director and teachers to express what they had been offended by in 2007. Over time and space given they felt comfortable in sharing. We made certain adjustments according to their criticisms. Since then they have been more open with their criticisms and correction of the current teams. They feel more welcomed to be involved in what we are doing in Mali because we were willing to listen to their concerns.*

*Each team pays a family to cook the midday meal for them. One team was running out of money at the end of the month and expressed to the family that they could not have the family cook for them that day because they could not pay for that day's meal. The family invited the team to eat with them without having to pay. It meant a lot because the team was finally on the receiving end of the relationship. Westerners are rarely short of resources and therefore are usually not on the receiving end. It was good for our relationship with the family to humbly receive without offering anything but our presence and gratitude.*

#### References and Further Reading:

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